



T E X A S ☆ T I M E S

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UNITED STATES SENATOR • TEXAS

Congress, Then and Now

By U.S. Sen. John Cornyn

As each year draws to a close, it is traditionally the time for reflection. We take stock of where we've been, and set goals for the future.

This is a particularly useful exercise for those of us in government. The U.S. Congress adjourned in early December having achieved some notable accomplishments, while also leaving a great deal of unfinished business.

For the first time in a decade, Congress took a tentative, but serious step to reduce federal spending. I supported the Deficit Reduction Act that cut approximately \$100 billion in projected outlays over the next decade.

As that legislation was being debated, I introduced an amendment that would have addressed fast-growing entitlement expenditures such as Medicaid, Medicare and Social Security, which compose two-thirds of federal spending. Though this common-sense measure didn't pass, I will pursue it again next year.

In the session's final hours, we extended several tax measures important to Texans. One is a \$4,000 annual college tuition deduction, and another is the research and development tax credit that is vital to many businesses in our state.

Most importantly, for those who itemize deductions on their federal income taxes, we extended the state and local sales tax deduction for two years. This means residents of Texas and six other states that don't have an income tax will be on a level playing field with other states that do.

Working families are paying steadily more for health insurance and medical costs, so I was especially pleased that Congress made important improvements to Health Savings Accounts (HSA). Payments into these accounts can be made with income before it's subject to payroll taxes, so our move to raise the contribution limits should have a big impact.

There were other significant steps forward. We reduced abuse of the legal system by revising class-action lawsuit rules, updated federal bankruptcy laws to protect consumers and encourage responsible budgeting, and safeguarded Second Amendment rights by banning lawsuits directed solely at the legal manufacture of firearms.

And Texas will eventually get major benefits from the Gulf of Mexico Energy Security Act of 2006, which opens more than eight million acres in the Gulf of Mexico to responsible oil and gas exploration and production. The state will begin receiving a portion of offshore royalty payments to combat beach erosion and other effects on the coastal environment.

I was most proud to help confirm two new members of the U.S. Supreme Court. Chief Justice John Roberts and Associate Justice Samuel Alito both understand well the proper role the judiciary should play in our federal system. I'm convinced

they will faithfully interpret laws made by elected representatives of the people.

As we look forward to 2007 and the 110th Congress, we see a great deal of unfinished business.

Domestically, we must repair our broken immigration system and restore respect for our laws. Though we talked about this issue a great deal for two years, we did not resolve the problem. In a post-9/11 world, we need to know who is coming into our country—and right now, we don't. Furthermore, it's affecting our economy, families, and eroding traditional respect for the rule of law. This situation will only deteriorate if Congress fails to act.

Leaders on both sides have pledged to work in a cooperative manner to address matters that were bogged down in partisanship during the 109th Congress.

The bipartisanship should start with Iraq and the war on terror. Protecting the American people is our first responsibility. In my view, we will be under assault from Islamic extremists for years—even decades—to come. We must join together on a strategy to win the war against these terrorists, not simply criticize, delay, or attempt to exploit setbacks for partisan advantage.

We all want the troops home as soon as possible, but our military strategy in Iraq must be based on clear national security considerations. We owe it to all Americans to establish a strategy, and to support it—with one voice.

I am determined to work in the coming year with my Senate colleagues on common goals. For example, I've long sought to bring more Texas sunshine to Washington. So Sen. Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.) and I intend to pursue open government legislation, to improve transparency and make the federal Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) more effective.

The Congressional delegation from Texas enjoys a well-deserved reputation for working together, Republicans and Democrats, on projects that are vital to our state. If we can expand that model to the entire Congress, and help reestablish cooperation and bipartisanship once again in Washington, 2007 will indeed be a happy new year for our country.

Sen. Cornyn is a member of the following Senate Committees: Armed Services, Judiciary, Budget, Small Business and Entrepreneurship, and Joint Economic. He is the chairman of the subcommittees on Immigration, Border Security and Citizenship and Emerging Threats and Capabilities. Cornyn served previously as Texas Attorney General, Texas Supreme Court Justice and Bexar County District Judge. For Sen. Cornyn's previous Texas Times columns: www.cornyn.senate.gov/columnn.